

The Rev. Dustin D. Berg

Calvary Episcopal Church / Kaneohe, Hawaii

3rd Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 7A: 21 June 2020

Genesis 21:8-21 / Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17 / Romans 6:1b-11 / Matthew 10:24-39

Good morning... to all of you here in person, and to all gathered from near and far, online. It seems we figured out something that works for now – and that you can hear me. The other day I was on a Zoom call with the bishop and others, and I heard of some additional things we can do to make this hybrid worship experience a bit better for everyone. So stay tuned.

Our world does not seem to be taking a vacation. While thankfully, most of the violence of the past couple of weeks has tapered off, much of the anger and frustration, call to action, call to repentance, and call to change is still very much in the news and, in fact, takes many forms. And as always, I am curious of your own experience. I wonder if it might be helpful for us to have some of the conversations around race and privilege and power and powerlessness that have been brought to the light in our country and elsewhere. So I welcome your thoughts.

As I've told you before, I think the lectionary – the scriptures that speak to us, week to week – is often genius. This week is no exception. We continue in Genesis, from our semi-continuous reading, to hear of the defining, early stories of God's people. And our Gospel challenges us, as it always does, toward the higher calling that we share, even as it speaks of swords and divided loyalties. The scriptures are always timely, but in some ways they are especially timely today.

Our country has begun to hear in the last few weeks, hopefully with new ears, of the evils of systemic racism that is so prevalent for so many. And we should take notice. We should take notice because whether we like it or not, we are all part of the problem, and hopefully, the solution. The Church, above all, needs to be very much in and a part of that conversation.

So that is where we pick up our story from Genesis. Abraham, you'll remember, already had one son, Ishmael, when Sarah conceived and bore Isaac. That's what we read last week, with the announcement of Sarah also bearing a child. Fast forward to today's Genesis reading, and we find Abraham's first son, Ishmael, then somewhere around 13 or 14 years old, playing with Isaac, by then a few months to maybe a year old. Sarah, however, is enraged – how dare this foreign woman's son be allowed to play with my own son! Isaac is the one promised, after all, and God made the covenant with Abraham and Sarah, not with Ishmael's mother, Hagar. To me, that sounds an awful lot like some of the power or privilege wielded today on account of race or class or status over persons deemed somehow lesser value. Abraham is thoroughly distressed and, caught between a rock and a hard place, sends Hagar and Ishmael away according to Sarah's wishes (but not without a word from God telling him, essentially, that they will be ok, for God will make a nation out of them too).

I hope this story pulls on your heart as it does mine. Hagar's voice, crying out in lament for her son... and Ishmael's voice too, though we don't directly hear from him. God, however, hears them both. God has looked on the plight of this now-single mother and her son in their desperation. You will not be abandoned, God says. Then, with a poetic beauty that calls to us

even today, through the ages, God says, “Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” Even in their weakness, God’s power calls out to this precious woman and her son. Lift. Him. Up. For I am not done with him, God says

Now, that’s just about all we ever hear of Ishmael in the Bible. But as you may know, he goes on and becomes the forebear of Muslim people.

Aside from being a shocking and yet tender story of a cast-out and destitute mother and her son, this story has much to call out from us today. Upon which group of persons, might we be casting blame for our own issues, perceived or otherwise? Where might we be exercising undue privilege over persons who differ from ourselves? And how are we, even the people of God, cheapening human life by our action or inaction? These are all live questions for us in 21st century America and throughout the world.

Yet the beauty of this story is also its redemption. When humans by their privilege or status or jealousy or greed trample on the personhood of other humans, God does not forget them. God does not abandon those the world sees with less value. Far from it. In fact, God has what many Bible scholars and teachers have called the “preferential option for the poor”. God is actively watching out for those whose rights or dignities or very lives as human beings are being violated. And God calls us to rise up alongside them – to “Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast...” as God called out to Hagar with Ishmael. Instead of forgetting, or ignoring, or worse, participating in the evils and sin that cause that kind of suffering, we are meant to be present with those who experience it.

None of this is to say that it’s a smooth road. And not only that, but it will put us actively in the crosshairs of those who enjoy their status or privilege at the expense of others. To put it another way, it will cost us some of our own comforts. So we shouldn’t be surprised when, like Jesus says, swords are drawn and we are taken through the muck by the powers that be. We shouldn’t be surprised that there is great resistance to acknowledging the personhood and dignity of the George Floyds, Rayshard Brookses, or Breonna Taylors of this world. For some, doing so would be... inconvenient.

Jesus calls us to fear not... even as some would rather silence we who profess to uphold the dignity of all human beings in our Baptismal Covenant. Jesus reminds us that his family, the ones that he loves (so, the whole *human* family, in other words), is of more value than many sparrows. Even the hairs of our heads are all counted – that is how precious we are to the One who created us. So give voice to the ones on the margins of our society, our world. Give heed to the ways we participate in systems and privileges that keep people down, or “away” from us. Make haste to share the good news with the poor in spirit. You, as human beings and as children of one Father, are more valuable than anything of this world. You, and Ishmael and Hagar, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, and Jesus’ disciples, near and far, past and present. The powers of this world will try and take that all away, but we must be part of the chorus of voices that tells of that love, sings of that grace, and walks in those steps first trodden by Hagar and Ishmael: dignity and humanity, love and embrace, for God calls us to remember, to proclaim, and above all, to not be afraid. Amen.